

# Wisdom, Not Delusion

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*A human being is a part of a whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.*

*This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.*

*Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.*

Albert Einstein

# The Social Brain:

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## *The Neuropsychology of Empathy, Compassion, and Assertiveness*

Salesmanship Club Youth and Family Centers  
Staff Development  
January 27, 2011

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# Topics

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- **Your loving nature**
- **Greed, hatred, heartache, and delusion**
- **Empathy**
- **Compassion**
- **Assertiveness**



**Your Loving Nature**

# Three Goal-Directed Systems Evolved in the Brain

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- **Avoid** “sticks,” threats, penalties, pain
- **Approach** “carrots,” opportunities, rewards, pleasure
- **Attach** to “us,” proximity, bonds, feeling close
- Although the three branches of the vagus nerve loosely map to the three systems, the essence of each is its aim, not its neuropsychology.
- Each system can draw on the other two for its ends.

# Love and the Brain

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- Social capabilities have been a primary driver of brain evolution.
- Reptiles and fish avoid and approach. Mammals and birds *attach* as well - especially primates and humans.
- Mammals and birds have bigger brains than reptiles and fish.
- The more social the primate species, the bigger the cortex.
- Since the first hominids began making tools ~ 2.5 million years ago, the brain has roughly tripled in size, much of its build-out devoted to social functions (e.g., cooperative planning, empathy, language). The growing brain needed a longer childhood, which required greater pair bonding and band cohesion.



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*All sentient beings developed through natural selection in such a way that pleasant sensations serve as their guide, and especially the pleasure derived from sociability and from loving our families.*

Charles Darwin





















# Oxytocin

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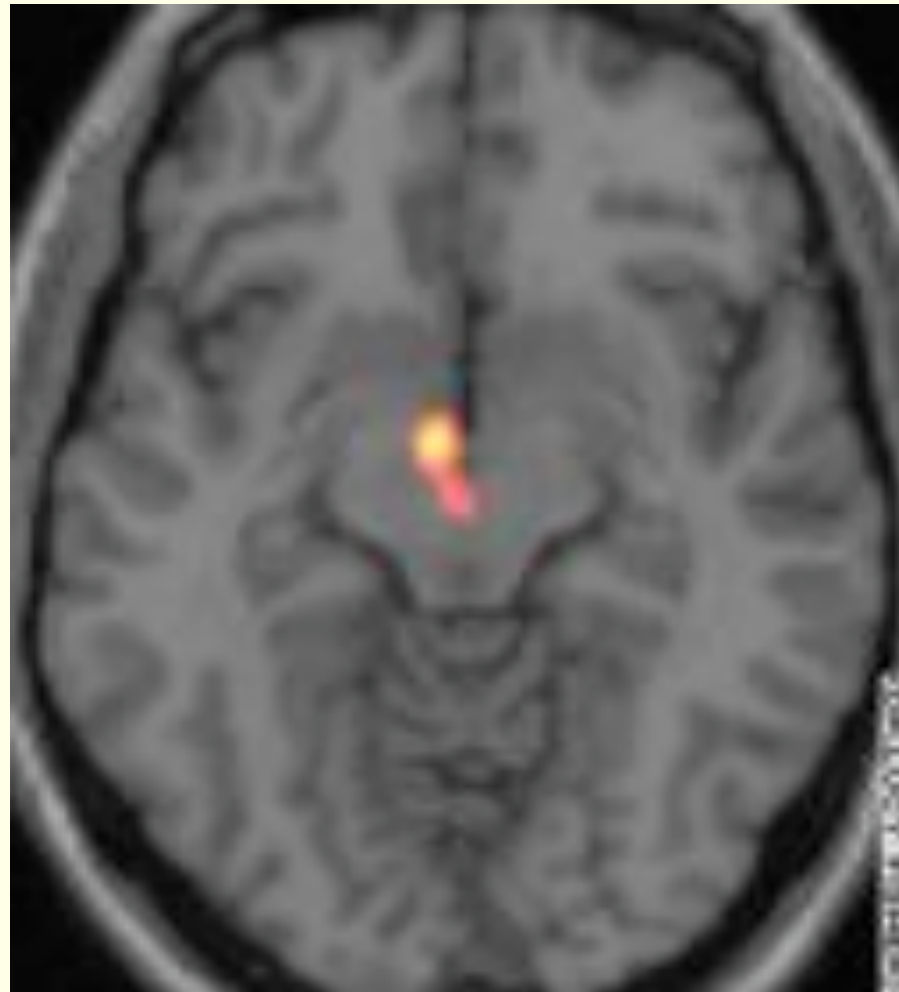
- It promotes bonding between parents and children - and between mates and friends, keeping kids alive
- In women, it triggers the let-down reflex in nursing, and tend-and-befriend behaviors during stress.
- In both sexes, it dampens the stress response; it feels pleasurable, relaxed, a “rightness.”
- It is stimulated by:
  - Physical contact (especially skin to skin)
  - Moving together harmoniously (e.g., dancing)
  - Warm feelings of rapport or love; devotion
  - Imagination of these
  - Nipple stimulation
  - Orgasm



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# The Rewards of Love

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*If there is anything I have learned about [people], it is that there is a deeper spirit of altruism than is ever evident.*

*Just as the rivers we see are minor compared to the underground streams, so, too, the idealism that is visible is minor compared to what people carry in their hearts unreleased or scarcely released.*

*(Hu)mankind is waiting and longing for those who can accomplish the task of untying what is knotted, and bringing these underground waters to the surface.*

Albert Schweitzer











**Greed, Hatred, Heartache, Delusion**

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***What is the nature of the brain when a person is:***

**Experiencing inner peace?**

**Self-actualizing?**

**Enlightened (or close to it)?**

# Home Base of the Human Brain

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When not threatened, ill, in pain, hungry, upset, or chemically disturbed, most people settle into being:

- **Calm** (the Avoid system)
- **Contented** (the Approach system)
- **Caring** (the Attach system)
- **Creative** - synergy of all three systems

This is the brain in its *responsive* mode.

# Responsive Mode

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# Some Benefits of Responsive Mode

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- Recovery from “mobilizations” for survival:
  - Refueling after depleting outpourings
  - Restoring equilibrium to perturbed systems
  - Reinterpreting negative events in a positive frame
  - Reconciling after separations and conflicts
- Promotes prosocial behaviors:
  - Experiencing safety decreases aggression.
  - Experiencing sufficiency decreases envy.
  - Experiencing connection decreases jealousy.
  - We’re more generous when our own cup runneth over.



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*The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life.  
I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy;  
I mean that if you are happy you will be good.*

Bertrand Russell

# Benefits of Positive Emotions

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- Emotions organize the brain as a whole, so positive ones have far-reaching benefits.
- These include:
  - Promote exploratory, “approach” behaviors
  - Lift mood; increase optimism, resilience
  - Counteract trauma
  - Strengthen immune and protect cardiovascular systems
  - Overall: “broaden and build”
  - Create positive cycles

# But to Survive, We Leave Home . . .

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- **Avoid:** When we feel threatened or harmed
- **Approach:** When we can't attain important goals
- **Attach:** When we feel isolated, disconnected, unseen, unappreciated, unloved

This is the brain in its *reactive* mode of functioning  
- a kind of inner homelessness.

# The Reactive Mode

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# Reactive Dysfunctions in Each System

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- **Approach** - Addiction; over-drinking, -eating, -gambling; compulsion; hoarding; driving for goals at great cost; spiritual materialism
- **Avoid** - Anxiety disorders; PTSD; panic, terror; rage; violence
- **Attach** - Borderline, narcissistic, antisocial PD; symbiosis; *folie a deux*; “looking for love in all the wrong places”

# Us and Them

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- Core evolutionary strategy: within-group cooperation, and between-group aggression.
- Both capacities and tendencies are hard-wired into our brains, ready for activation. And there is individual variation.
- Our biological nature is much more inclined toward cooperative sociability than toward aggression and indifference or cruelty. We are just very reactive to social distinctions and threats.
- That reactivity is intensified and often exploited by economic, cultural, and religious factors.
- Two wolves in your heart:
  - Love sees a vast circle in which all beings are “us.”
  - Hate sees a small circle of “us,” even only the self.

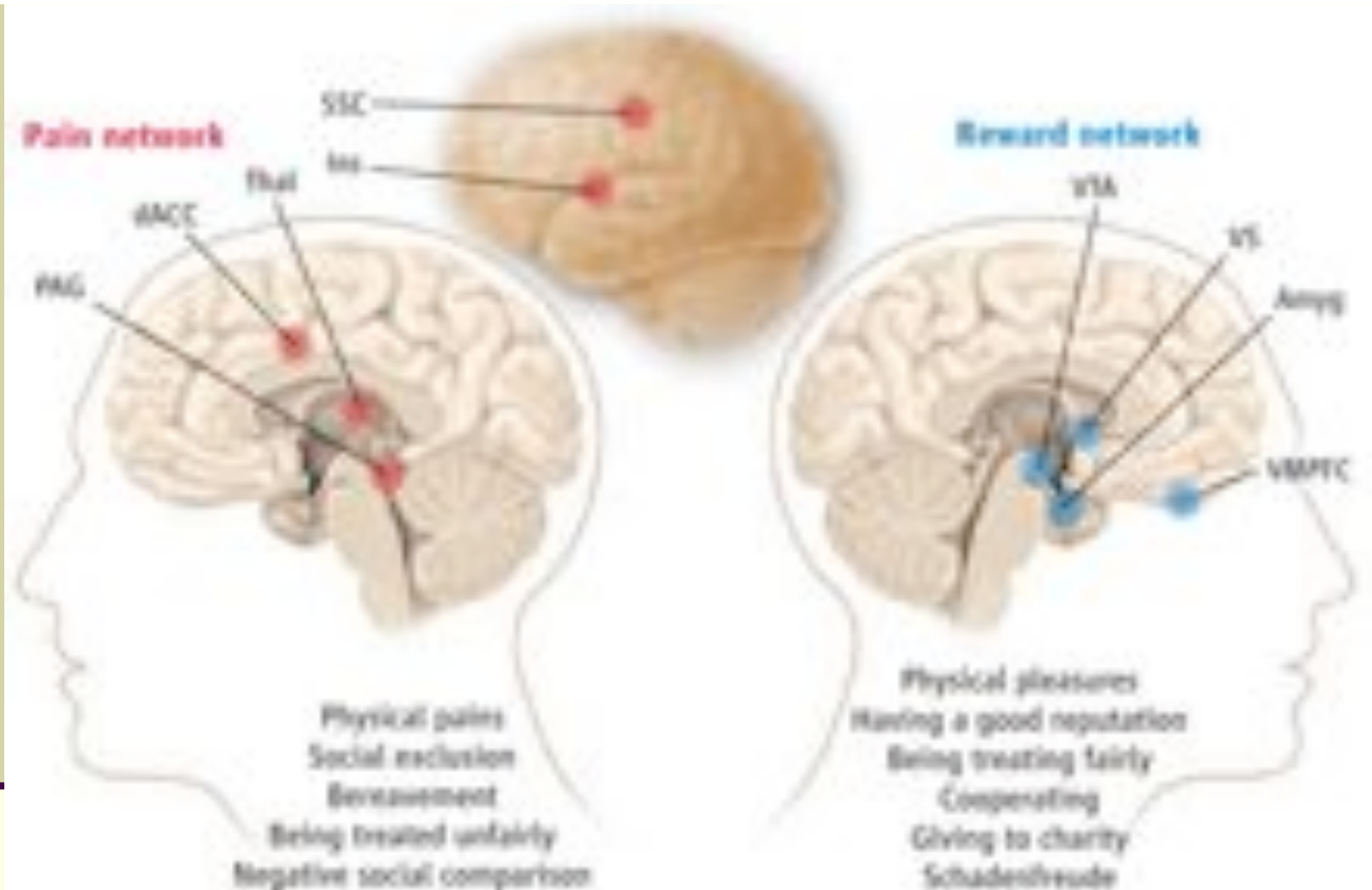
*Which one will you feed?*

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*In between-family fights, the baboon's 'I'  
expands to include all of her close kin;  
in within-family fights,  
it contracts to include only herself.*

*This explanation serves for baboons  
as much as for the Montagues and Capulets.*

Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth



Pain network: Dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC), insula (Ins), somatosensory cortex (SSC), thalamus (Thal), and periaqueductal gray (PAG).

Reward network: Ventral tegmental area (VTA), ventral striatum (VS), ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), and amygdala (Amyg).

K. Sutliff, in Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2009, *Science*, 323:890-891



# Choices . . .

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**Reactive Mode**

Or?



**Responsive Mode**



**Empathy**

# What Is Empathy?

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- It is sensing, feeling, and understanding how it is for the other person. In effect, you *simulate* his or her inner world.
- It involves (sometimes subtly) all of these elements:
  - Bodily resonance
  - Emotional attunement
  - Conceptual understanding
- Empathy is usually communicated, often tacitly.
- We can give empathy, we can receive it, and we can ask for it.

# Neural Substrates of Empathy

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- Three *simulating* systems:
  - Actions: “mirror” systems; temporal-parietal
  - Feelings: resonating emotionally; insula
  - Thoughts: “theory of mind”; prefrontal cortex
- These systems interact with each other through association and active inquiry.
- They produce an automatic, continual re-creation of aspects of others’ experience.

# Empathy Skills

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- Pay attention.
- Be open.
- Read emotion in face and eyes.
- Sense beneath the surface.
- Drop aversion (judgments, distaste, fear, anger, withdrawal).
- Investigate actively.
- Express empathic understanding:
  - Reflect the content
  - Resonate with the tone and implicit material
  - Questions are fine
  - Offer respect and wise speech throughout

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**Can you attend to the postures, facial expressions,  
and movements of another person?**

**Can you attune to and feel something of the  
emotions of another person?**

**Can you have some sense of the thoughts, hopes,  
and concerns of another person?**

# Reflections about Empathy

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- You're more likely to get empathy if you're:
  - Open, present
  - Honest, real, authentic
  - Reasonably clear
  - Responsible for your own experience
  - Taking it in when you feel felt
- Empathy can be negotiated:
  - Name it as a topic in the relationship
  - Follow NVC format: "When X happens, I feel Y, because I need Z. So I request \_\_\_\_\_."
  - Stay with it.



# Compassion



# The Wisdom of Connection

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*A human being is a part of a whole, called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.*

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Albert Einstein



# Feeling Cared About


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- As we evolved, we increasingly turned to and relied on others to feel safer and less threatened.
  - Exile from the band was a death sentence in the Serengeti.
  - Attachment behaviors: relying on the secure base
  - The well-documented power of social support to buffer stress and aid recovery from painful experiences
- Methods:
  - Recognize it's kind to others to feel cared about yourself.
  - Look for occasions to feel cared about and take them in.
  - Deliberately bring to mind the experience of being cared about in challenging situations.
  - Be caring yourself.


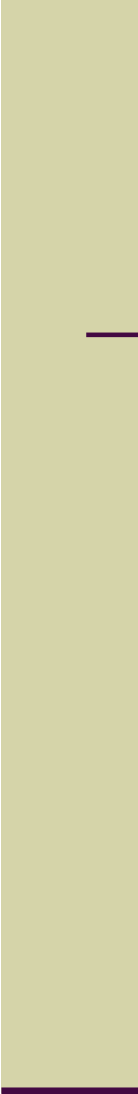
# Compassion Practice

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- Types of wishes
  - Safety
  - Health
  - Happiness
  - Ease
  
- Types of beings
  - Self
  - Benefactor
  - Friend
  - Neutral
  - Difficult
  
- Continually “omitting none” in all directions



**Can you extend the circle of “us” to include the whole wide world?**



# Feeding the Wolf of Love

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- Focus on similarities between “us” and “them.”
- Consider others as young children.
- Notice good things about neutral or unpleasant people.
- Bring to mind the sense of someone who cares about you.
- Keep extending out the sense of “us” to include everyone.
- Consider others as your mother or dear friend in a past life.
- Restraint about over-identifying with “us”
- Reflect on the suffering of so many people in the world.
- Self-generate feelings of kindness and love.



# **Assertiveness**

# Being for Yourself

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- Moral teachings tell us to be compassionate and kind toward all beings. And that whatever we do to the world affects us, and whatever we do to ourselves affects the world.
- You are one of the “all beings!” Further, kindness to yourself benefits the world, while hurting yourself harms the world.
- It’s a general moral principle that the more power you have over someone, the greater your duty is to use that power wisely. Well, who is the one person in the world you have the greatest power over? It’s your future self. You hold that life in your hands, and what it will be depends on how you care for it.
- Consider yourself as an innocent child, as deserving of care and happiness as any other.



# Feeling Strong

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- Relaxed, resting in awareness
- Feeling the strength in awareness itself
- Energy and strength in your breathing . . . in arms and legs . . . in your whole being . . .
- A spacious strength that lets others flow through
- In relationship and at peace

# Benefits of Unilateral Virtue

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- It simplifies things: all you have to do is live by your own code, and others will do whatever they do.
- It feels good in its own right; it brings peace of mind, “the bliss of blamelessness.”
- It minimizes inflammatory triggers, and encourages good behavior in others.
- It stands you on the moral high ground.
- It teaches you what you can ask for from others

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*There are those who do not realize that  
one day we all must die.*

*But those who do realize this  
settle their quarrels.*

The Buddha

# Healthy Assertiveness

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What it is: Speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the context of relationships

What supports it:

- Being on your own side
- Self-compassion
- Naming the truth to yourself
- Refuges: Three Jewels, reason, love, nature, God
- Taking care of the big things so you don't grumble about the little ones
- Health and vitality

# Healthy Assertiveness: How to Do It

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- Know your aims; stay focused on the prize; lose battles to win wars
- Ground in empathy, compassion, and love
- Practice unilateral virtue
- Communicate for yourself, not to change others
  - Wise Speech; be especially mindful of tone
  - NVC: “When X happens, I feel Y because I need Z.”
  - Dignity and gravity
  - Distinguish empathy building (“Y”) from policy-making
- If appropriate, negotiate solutions
  - Establish facts as best you can (“X”)
  - Find the deepest wants (“Z”)
  - Focus mainly on “from now on”
  - Make clear plans, agreements
  - Scale relationships to their actual foundations

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*If we could read the secret history  
of our enemies,  
we should find in each [person's] life  
sorrow and suffering enough  
to disarm any hostility.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

# Great Books

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See [www.RickHanson.net](http://www.RickHanson.net) for other great books.

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- Begley, S. 2007. *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*. Ballantine.
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# Key Papers - 1

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See [www.RickHanson.net](http://www.RickHanson.net) for other scientific papers.

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## *Where to Find Rick Hanson Online*

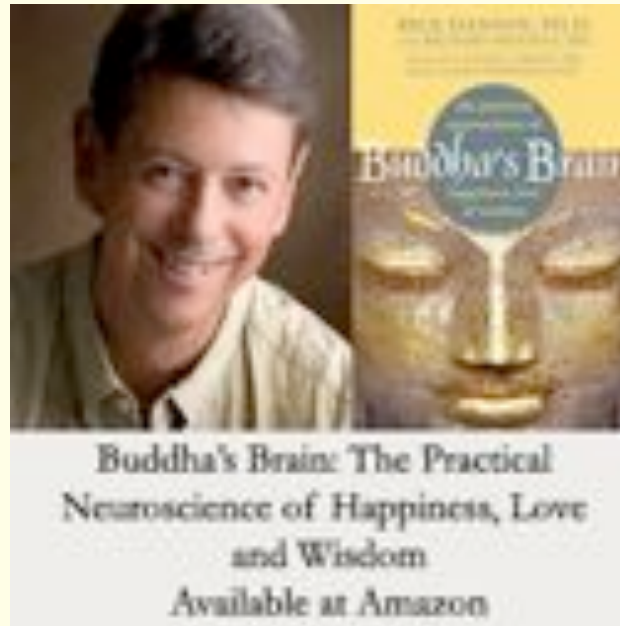
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